



MEXICO

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Overview

According to the Mexican “Education Sector Program 2007-2012,”¹ while progress has been made in expanding coverage in basic education and in reducing gender and regional inequalities in educational services, there are still serious lags. Over 30 million people did not complete or never attended primary or secondary school. This means that one third of the Mexican population has not had access to basic education or could not finish it. Despite increases in coverage, the Mexican education system still presents serious deficiencies: high failure and dropout rates of pupils, particularly in early teenage to teenage population, and low levels of learning. The prevailing school education system, as demonstrated by national and international tests still fails to fully develop in pupils the skills to solve problems creatively and effectively, and to be better prepared for the challenges they will find later in life or when integrating into the labor market.

Counterbalancing this panorama, innovations proposed by the Integral Reform of

Basic Education (RIEB by its Spanish acronym), which involve a competency- based approach and a classroom project methodology, may be Mexico's entry into a new level of education quality. This could be possible to the extent that principals and teachers are able to make these guidelines real in their schools and classrooms. This would also require continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure appropriate implementation throughout the country. In the RIEB, plans and programs emphasize the development of life skills required to be successful in the globalized world of the twenty-first century, and the use of higher order, problem-solving skills.

Mexico has achieved clear educational progress in the last two decades, mostly in terms of coverage; however, social demand exceeds state educational offer, especially in upper secondary education. This lack of coverage is particularly severe in indigenous regions, adding grievance to their poverty and social exclusion. The demand for quality education must be more radical and urgent in schools where students are from the most disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. For them, school is often the only opportunity to prepare for a better future and break the bond that links poverty to the marginalization and ignorance.

As a whole, the Mexican education system has shown considerable growth over the years. This is a consequence of state efforts to guarantee the right of education for all Mexicans and demonstrates the vocation of the Mexican state to promote education at all levels. The gradual integration of the Mexican education system and the number of services offered, are evidence to this growth, but financial and accountability challenges remain.

The magnitude of these efforts is due in large part to the desire to keep increasing the GDP share of resources devoted to education. Although this growing trend suffered a decline after 1981, in the "lost decade" for Latin America, in 1988 it began to recover, rising by 5 percent of GDP with the explicit aim of keeping it tied to the stabilization and growth of the national economy, rather than determining it from other social factors or financial restrictions. According to OECD, in 2008 Mexico spent in education 5.8 percent of its GDP (including public and private). This places Mexico at the OECD average in terms of education spending.

An important achievement for the country is the increased access to higher education. According to the 2010 census, the average schooling of the population over 15 years rose to 8.6 years.² However, problems such as illiteracy linger on, particularly in the rural areas.

The structure of schooling

The highest educational authority in Mexico is the National Secretariat of Education (SEP from its Spanish acronym). The SEP designed a national curriculum and textbooks which must be followed by all schools in the country, whether public or private. In this sense, the Mexican education system is highly centralized. With a population of over 112 million, Mexico is the tenth most populated country in the world and third in the Americas. A country of such size has an equally massive schooling system: 34.4 million pupils who account for almost a third of the total population attend 226,374 schools.³

Education in Mexico is made up of three main levels: basic, middle higher, and higher. Basic education is compulsory, and comprises two levels, primary and secondary (note that latter corresponds to intermediate rather than secondary education in the United States). Vocational education can be accessed just by completing basic primary education.

Middle higher education (known as “preparatoria”) is equivalent to secondary schooling in Europe and the United States. It can have a technical strand or an academic (aimed at higher education) strand which is known as “Bachillerato”. This last strand leads to undergraduate and postgraduate education. The education system also offers adult education (literacy, primary and secondary education, formal training for work) and indigenous education or bilingual and bi-cultural services (preschool, primary and secondary).

Article 10 of the General Law of Education describes the structure of the Mexican school system, made up of: a) pupils and teachers; b) educational authorities; c) plans, programs, methods and teaching materials; d) the educational institutions of the State and of its decentralized bodies; e) the individuals’ institutions with authorization or with recognition of official validity of education; and f) the higher education institutions to which the law grants autonomy.

The system offers educational services through two main channels: schooling and open education. Schooling provides education to groups of pupils who daily go to an educational institution according to the official educational schedule, while open education serves pupils who cannot attend a school to continue or finish their education. Open education is conveyed to pupils by means of pedagogical advising without the need for going to school every day; pupils subject themselves to a series of exams in order to certify their progress in the fulfillment of the program. Open education is provided with resources such as study guides and texts published specifically for this type of schooling.

The process of expansion of the Mexican educational system modified the old elitist

patterns of access to the most exclusive institutions, but inequality of schooling opportunities in the different social sectors has tended to transfer to the post-basic educational levels, particularly the mid-higher and higher levels to private institutions. There are still educational disparities among the states and regions of the country.

The legal framework

The legal framework for education in Mexico begins with the Constitution (1917). Particularly, article 3 recognizes education as the right of every citizen. This article also defines broad nation-wide goals for education in a sociological perspective: it defines the role of education in Mexican society, and the corresponding characteristics it should have in order to make its social contribution: it should be free, secular, and should aim for the advance of science, technology and human development of Mexican citizens.

Articles 3 and 31 of the constitution were modified in March 1993. In July of the same year the General Law of Education (LGE) was adopted. This law replaced the old Federal Education Law. LGE (1993) further elaborates the sociological goals of education in Mexican society, and defines responsibilities for each government level (state, federal) in education. The Federal government is in charge of the definition of a national curriculum, which is accompanied by national, free textbooks. State governments do make a minor contribution to the definition of contents of those educational materials. LGE also defines educational levels and types of education in Mexico (i.e basic, adult, work education), and states rules regarding the financing of education, the promotion of educational equality in the Mexican nation, and the rules by which non-state educational institutions should adhere.

The LGE also defines mechanisms by which families and society can participate in the school life. The role of these two actors is mainly observational, though they are encouraged to monitor proper school operation. According to article 69 of the General Law of Education, a Social Participation School Council, with broad educational and social representation, should function at every school. Among its duties are to be familiar with the school calendar, the educational goals, and the progress of school activities in order to help the teacher to implement them better; to take note of the evaluations that educational authorities carry out; to foster teachers' and parents' collaboration; to propose rewards and recognition for pupils, teachers, school executives, and employees; to promote out-of- school activities which reinforce pupils' education; to carry out participation, coordination and spreading actions for civil defense and school emergencies; to encourage family and community interest for pupil performance; to give opinions on pedagogical matters; to help to

reduce the bad social conditions which have an influence on education; to carry out specific works of improvement of school facilities; to support the school daily tasks and to carry out different activities for the benefit of the school.

The LGE gave rise to the Education Sector Plan 2007-2012 (SEP, 2007) and the “Alliance for Education” (2008) between the federal government, state governments and the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). Education Sector Plan 2007 – 2012 defined six strategic goals for Mexican education. The first is to increase educational quality. Goals two and five are related to broaden educational opportunities, increase equality in education and to create educational institutions able to provide such quality education. Goal number three is aimed at fostering the use and application of Information Technologies in education. Goal four is about offering education for human development which strengthens civil society and finally goal six is about the improvement in the management of educational institutions, and the further participation of communities in school affairs. The alliance for education, although not of legal character, is an important political commitment of several social sectors (government both state and federal, education workers). The alliance states the intention of several state agencies and the SNTE to take action in favor of the improvement of education quality.

Schooling is regulated by the SEP. This is recognized in the Organic Law of Federal Civil Service (1976). This law was amended in February and May 1992. Article 38 establishes the role of the SEP. The Internal Regulations of the SEP were issued in March 1994, describing the specific functions of the Minister of State Education, of the Undersecretaries, of the State offices, and of the decentralized Administrative Organs of the SEP.

Regarding curricular issues in schooling, Agreement 592 (2011) was an important legal advance in order to further integrate curriculum of the different levels of Mexican education. The agreement describes in detail pedagogical foundations, general guidelines for the common Mexican school curriculum. It also details competences, achievement indicators and specific contents for all areas of the curriculum. It also includes guidelines for ethnic and indigenous education. It is the main official curricular document in Mexico.

Freedom to establish non-state schools

The right of private sector individuals or organizations to provide educational services is fully recognized in the legal framework, starting with the federal constitution and the general law of education. Education provided by non-government actors is subject to the same regulations as government education. Every

private school in Mexico should be properly licensed by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). As a consequence, certifications provided by private schools are valid nationwide.

Every kind of individual or organization is eligible to open a school, in as much as is compliant with SEP regulations. No organization has a particular advantage regarding the process of starting a school.

There are no privately-operated state schools in Mexico, as is the case with the charter schools in the US or similar schemes in other Latin American countries. Non-profit institutions, however, can open schools aimed at low income families.

Homeschooling

The Mexican constitution in its article 31 states that it is an obligation of every Mexican citizen to have their children to attend either public or private institutions in order to receive proper education. The obligation of parent to have preschool, primary and secondary education is further stated in article 4 of the General Law of Education.

However, there is a loophole which seems to have been used by some home schooling families. The National Institute for Adult Education (INEA by its Spanish acronym) is able to test pupils older than 15 years who for one or another reason have been out of the school system. INEA test results and educational processes can be recognized by higher education institutions, allowing the entrance of pupils not coming from the school system to higher education. Such cases are however, rare.

School choice not limited by family income

Low income families in Mexico can only choose to send their children to state schools in the geographical area where they live. The Secretariat of Public Education, however, asks private schools to provide scholarships depending on the number of pupils they have. These are assigned mostly to pupils of the same institution. Conversely, high SES families are the only ones who can afford the cost of elite, private schools. There are middle class private institutions as well, which tuition is suited to the economic capacity of its corresponding target families.

Private schools must conform to the SEP requirements, and they are frequently evaluated. Private schools are generally expensive, so parents have to choose the most feasible option

according to their budgets. In some cases schools offer scholarship programs for those pupils who cannot afford their charges. Such scholarships are awarded mainly on the basis of merit and pupils receiving them must maintain academic performance standards.

In public schools parents have some range of school choice, as to the geographical area in which they live. Admission is conditional on the available places in each school.

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

Distinctive character

Public schools have an official national curriculum which is used nationwide. There is only one subject matter which is freely decided by each Mexican state; typically the study of Geography and History of the corresponding state. This is the only conspicuous difference between the national curriculum and that of the states.

Private schools are located primarily in the capital cities of the states. It is only after 1940, with the end of the period of conflict over Catholic schooling and the call for “national unity,” which included the promise of respect for private initiative, that private schools emerged and began a period of significant growth: in 1934 there were 2,872, by 1940 this had declined to 1,555, but by 1970 the number almost doubled to reach 3,280. For these schools, the reform bill that allowed the teaching of religion was not an actual allowance: under the cover of extracurricular activities as “values”, “human development”, etc., religious instruction was a common practice in private schools, despite education supposed to be secular. ⁴

The private school sector is diverse and complex: many important schools remain Catholic in orientation, whether served by lay teachers or religious congregations. Along with Catholic schools are international schools such as the Franco-Mexican school, the Japanese lyceum, the German School or the American College. There are also schools that boast innovative pedagogical models. During this century private schools have also expanded to education levels government has been unable to fully cover: early childhood education (especially child care), preschool, primary, secondary and now education secondary and higher. It is undeniable that in all cases, private schools offer education to social sectors with which certain parents identify culturally and socially. Parents who attend these institutions pay for a service than they expect to be of superior quality to that of public schools and which is aimed at adding value to the education of their children.

Decisions about admitting pupils

Only pupils who meet admission requirements may enter state schools. Tests correspond to ages for each school grade, and are not meant to exclude pupils from the system: if pupils do not achieve the expected results, they enter re-enforcement programs to be promoted to the next school year at the same level as their peers.

In private schools, either religious or international, there are admission requirements of academic and financial nature. The religious schools prefer parents which share their faith, without this being explicit. There is flexibility on the part of the government for religious schools: freedom to practice their rites inside its premises is guaranteed, for example in Catholic and Jewish schools. Public schools are secular (Article 3 of the Constitution)

When a pupil must switch from school to another, this is done in accordance with the number of students in the receiving institution.

Decisions about staff

In the public education sector, the Federal government in conjunction with State governments is in charge of appointing teachers to their corresponding teaching places. Teachers for preschool or primary schools study in “Basic Normal Schools” (Escuelas normales), institutions devoted specifically to teacher training. This training typically lasts 4 years. There are also “Higher Normal Schools” (Escuelas Normales Superiores) which can train secondary teachers. Usually only graduates from Basic Normal schools do access such training programs. Non-pedagogical higher education undergraduates are also eligible to become secondary teachers.

Both private and public Normal Schools share the same curriculum, and once students graduate from such schools they are entitled to a teaching position. In order to be formally appointed, teachers must take a National Test for Entering the Teaching Service. Usually teachers are appointed to schools in the area they have been trained. To be appointed as teacher in the public sector in Mexico is reliant only on academic qualifications and state exams. Whichever their formal training is, in order to be appointed as teachers in the public school system, potential teachers should belong to the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). Once teachers are in the teaching career (“Carrera Magisterial”), their tenure is regulated by a ranking system called *escalafón* which may grant them economic stimulus. The participation in this tenure ranking system is voluntary and is aimed at three main

goals: Stimulating the quality of education by recognizing teaching labor, Reinforce the interest of teachers for continuous professional development, and to improve the life conditions and social living standards of Basic Education Teachers. The tenure ranking system has five levels, A, B, C, D and E. In order to advance along these levels factors such as years of service, academic qualifications, professional development activities and in-school performance are taken into account. The General Direction of Higher Education for School Professionals regulates normal schools and follows up teacher performance.⁵

Teachers in private schools at preschool and primary levels should have authorization from the Secretariat of Public Education. In order to become secondary teachers, potential teachers should take a test at the National Center for the Evaluation of Higher Education. Private institutions can select teachers in accordance with their mission.

Accountability for school quality

Federal and state governments, through multiple agencies and school officials, coordinate the administrative and technical control of teaching in primary and secondary schools.

The principal or headmaster, at the school level, carries out planning, guidance and accountability functions, and has responsibility for staff, material resources and financial administration. In secondary schools, assistants help headmasters with their duties; the teaching staff plans, guides and evaluates education in the group they are responsible for. The Technical-consultative council defines aspects of the organization and integration of the service and carries out the necessary consultations for the improvement of implementation of the plan and of the syllabuses. In secondary schools the educational assistance staff provides the following services: educational guidance, school medicine, social work and prefecture.

Each school develops a School Transformation Strategic Plan that includes four dimensions: curriculum educational dimension, a dimension of social participation, organizational and administrative dimension, turning all is relative to standards for Basic Education. The TEAP / PAT as a planning tool makes it possible to coordinate the content and the support that the different programs and projects offer in order to make more efficient their implementation and the human and material resources used for enhancement and for compliance.

In a school district, supervisors and general inspectors (for secondary education) carry out general technical-pedagogical functions, provide administrative supervision, and link between the national/regional authorities and the school authorities. Supervisors must know the educational needs of the community; they must organize and promote school work in all its aspects and link the national educational policy features to the specific achievements of each school. The yearly plan of the school is sent to the area supervisor and to the general inspectors (for secondary education) by the headmaster, so that they can include it in the work plan of the corresponding area.

Once the yearly operative program of the primary education system is elaborated, the supervisor has a specific program for his/her area or sector, which he will have to supervise so that schools carry it out. As this makes apparent, the supervisor of the school area does the technical supervision of school functioning, according to the rules and the requirements that the educational authorities prescribe. However, the internal control of the provision of education is completely up to the school headmaster and the supervision of the educational task in each class is the responsibility of the appointed teacher.

The school headmaster, by means of the supervisor, assembles and sends to the superior educational authorities the requested additional information, such as the list of staff members, statistical data on pupil situations at the beginning and at the end of the course, the different methods of pupil control, the need for teaching materials, equipment, maintenance, school census, technical information, etc. The educational authorities responsible for the operation of the primary and secondary education levels send the staff and the material resources to schools, in accordance with the budget that has been approved.

The evaluations – as an objective mechanism of accountability – which teachers do every day, though based on the required syllabus, are carried out with informal, non-standardized instruments and the results are interpreted according to each teacher's specific experience, so they are not comparable in practice. Since the requirements are adapted by each teacher to his or her specific conditions, which is not incorrect, this does not provide a national measurement with a single parameter, the official program of education). This means that, in order to establish a national evaluation system, it is necessary to have measurements done by external technicians. External measurement allows uniform measurement instruments and standards, guaranteeing administration on an equal basis and interpretation of results with the same criteria.

For this purpose, since 2006 there has been a National Assessment of Educational Achievement in Schools, ENALCE. The purpose of ENALCE is to generate a single national measure to provide comparable information from the knowledge and skills with pupils in the subjects evaluated. This would allow:

1. Encouraging the participation of parents and youth in the educational process.
2. Providing elements to facilitate the planning of teaching in the classroom.
3. Meeting specific requirements for training teachers and administrators.
4. Processes underpinning effective and relevant educational planning and policy.
5. Meeting criteria of transparency and accountability.

There is a recent scheme of incentives for scores on the ENLACES test in basic primary education. Schools which obtain high scores can be given economic incentives. There are no sanctions for lower scores. Apart from this recent initiative, accountability for school quality in Mexico is mostly based in inputs than in outcomes.

Teaching of values

The Federal Constitution defines public education as secular; hence, it does not favor any religion or ideology to be thought in public schools. However, in order to promote the cultural diversity of the nation, along with the peaceful coexistence of its citizens, National agreement 592 of 2008 recognizes the importance of education in diversity and inclusion of marginalized social groups. One of the four main pillars on which Mexican curriculum is structured is called “Personal development and education for pacific coexistence”, which is aimed at promoting a certain set of values: democracy, peace, freedom and respect for the law and the community. This field of study encompasses human rights, civics and moral education.

The SEP also has the Operative Program for Transparency and Battle against Corruption in the field of the educational sector. It is developing a quality and transparency culture in the public service by improving the work systems, methods and processes and the appropriate information of the most relevant aspects of the Ministry of Public Education. This initiative is framed in the National Program of Transparency and Battle against

Corruption in the field of the Federal Civil Service issued by the SECODAM, which is now the Ministry of the Civil Service.

Endnotes

¹ SEP, 2007.

² INEGI, 2010.

³ SEP 2011.

⁴ García Alcaraz, 2002

⁵ SEP, 2009.

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